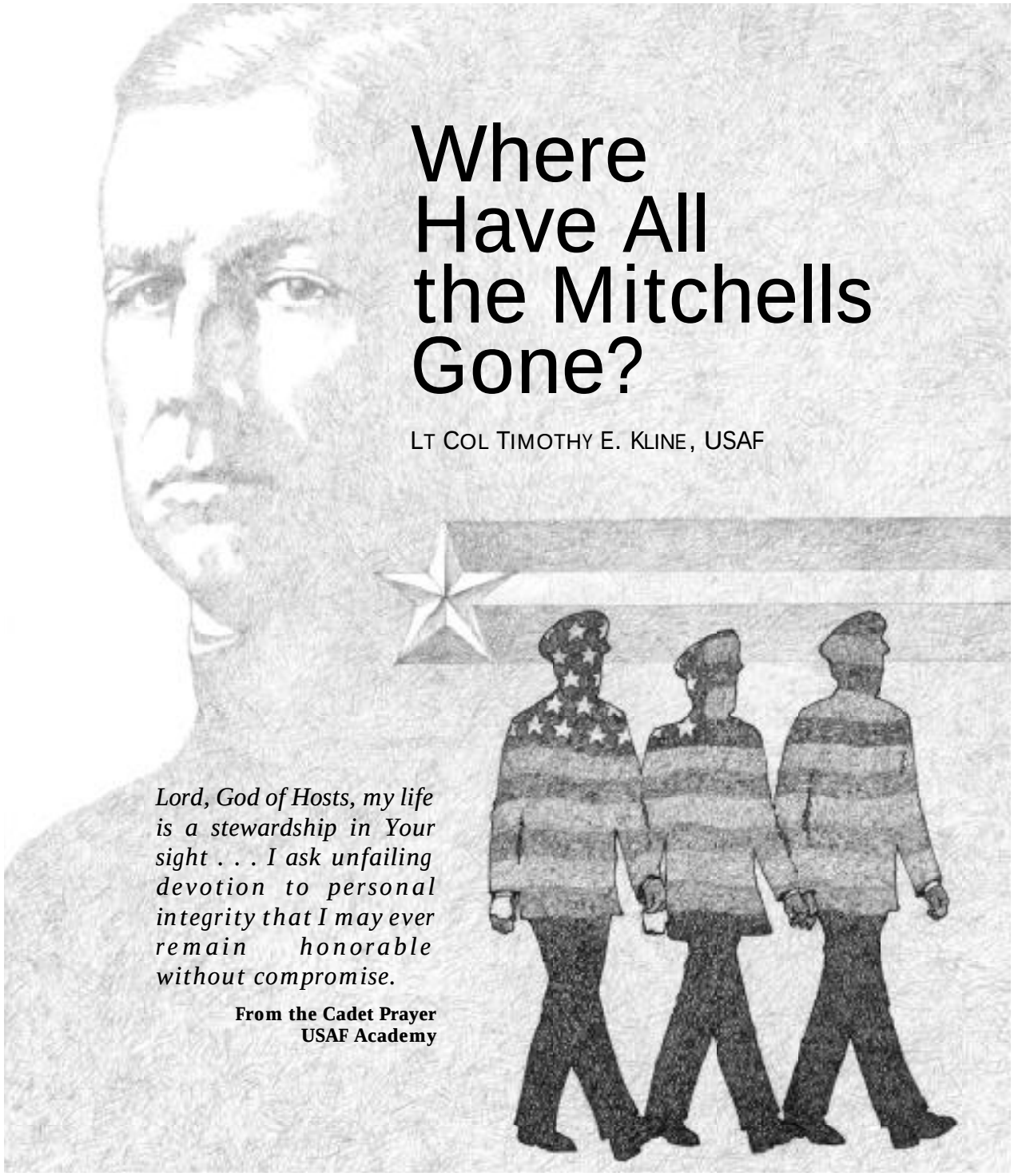
Where Have All the Mitchells Gone?

LT COL TIMOTHY E. KLINE, USAF



Lord, God of Hosts, my life is a stewardship in Your sight . . . I ask unfailing devotion to personal integrity that I may ever remain honorable without compromise.

From the Cadet Prayer
USAF Academy

THE LONE PORTRAIT leans forward at the base of a raised platform where guests and staff take meals in elevated splendor within the US Air Force Academy's glass and aluminum centerpiece, Mitchell Hall. The entire wing appears three times daily before the stern glare of that leathery face, which, more than any other, is the face of airpower ascendant—American airpower. It is reassuring to a budding generation of military-aviation specialists that things of the spirit can transcend career considerations—that nation and honor supersede the narrower traits of group conformity and safety which mark the serviceman's routine.

William "Billy" Mitchell seems an ironic professional focal point for a military service characterized today by careful managers on the leading edge of American technology. Yet, each of the famous architects of the bright legend that spawned an independent US Air Force rode the shock wave of Mitchell's defiant vision. Henry "Hap" Arnold, Carl "Tooey" Spaatz, and Ira C. Eaker were famous disciples of a combat leader whose cashiered career set in motion a triumph he would not live to see. He received the Medal of Honor posthumously. In a lucid piece recounting the legacy in detail, Lt Col George M. Hall, US Army, wrote of Mitchell, "The individual who responds to the imperatives of honor under circumstances when honor encompasses duty may be tempted to act against the grain of duty when it does not coincide with the same imperatives."[1]

Mitchell, in an Army uniform, cut across the grain of a tradition that considers "military individualism" a potential spoiler of democracy. Speaking independently, he precipitated an expected reaction by the institutional leadership of the older services.[2] Prof. Stanley Falk, in examining the "apparent incompatibility" of the national predilection for military leaders who are independent heroes while at the same time operatives in a "precise bureaucratic imperative," determined that "individualized values are a threat to the entire range of traditional military norms."[3] Mitchell was the upshot, deliberately and quite legitimately dispatched by a military tribunal that recognized him as a threat to its order and stability. Yet, he looms large at the Academy, where a thousand and more formative minds can collectively consider his compelling gaze and reflect that rugged countenance. What must the enshrinement of such a noble man mean to young people still being nurtured on the rudiments of airpower? Should they incline themselves to emulate the principled performance of that exemplar? Could they succeed by doing so?

As it fell from Elijah to Elisha, so the mantle of Mitchell passed smoothly to the next generation of airmen. The people who witnessed his banishment to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, his reversion to the rank of colonel, the dramatic court-martial, and his resignation, were ardent personal boosters. They had stood by Billy Mitchell despite threatened careers. Arnold, Spaatz, Eaker, and even Mitchell's immediate boss, the sagacious Mason Patrick, backed him fully.[4] Arnold won five stars. Spaatz and Eaker launched an air war in Europe that finally set the Air Force free. Their mentor's words became their own words. "Wars will be won or lost with the military capability possessed when war starts," echoed Eaker.[5] "The nation that hangs its destiny on a false preparation will find itself hopelessly outclassed from the beginning," Mitchell warned long before.[6] The fruitfulness of that first wave of Mitchell adherents was impressive: the combined bomber offensive was their unique achievement. But how potent is that impulse in the Air Force today?

Models of success in the new Air Force tend to be managerial. Caution is in the wind. Everyone knows that courage can boost a career only so high. Robin Olds and Charles

This article first appeared in *Air University Review* 33, no. 4 (May–June 1982): 28–32.

Billy Mitchell.

"A Billy Mitchell every now and then would provide just the right flavor to make service life more savory."

"Chuck" Yeager are handy examples of such eclipsed glory. They shone brightly, served rather long, and were quietly dismissed by fiat. They were good, solid heroes who each got a star, as Mitchell did, but they went home to intact legends, books, talk, conventions, and memory. Of course, they balked at times, but neither one was pressed by honor to lift the banner of national unpreparedness, as Billy Mitchell was. Theirs was another calling. They retain useful personal images of immense benefit to a service that must still justify its existence by wielding a glittering sword borne up on wings by men of bone and blood.

The apparent dichotomy of the Air Force leadership ideal is strange. The officer corps is bound by an effectiveness rating system that emphasizes careful husbanding of resources over boldness; it values caution over ardent spirit or daring innovation. Individuals occupying officer billets must wonder whether the familiar Mitchell image is a valid behavior model or whether it is a warning that outspokenness will bring swift and sure retribution.

Since Mitchell, no dissenting military leader has suffered or, for that matter, has been offered the forum of a public court-martial.[7] Modern generals are kept in line by a tight infringement of First Amendment freedom-of-speech rights. Free expression of ideas among military men is understood to disturb civilian control. Maj Felix Moran, commenting on the case of Maj Gen John K. Singlaub, US Army, Retired, noted, "When civilian supremacy has actually been at stake, administrative actions, such as removal, reassignment, and forced retirement have been taken against the errant officer" in lieu of rigorous enforcement of Article 88, Uniform

Code of Military Justice, concerning prohibitions of free speech.[8]

The general-officer environment now seems so politically precarious that most senior officers must feel wholly submerged in a pervading atmosphere of intimidation. Maureen Mylander examined this situation with bemusement in *The Generals: Making It, Military Style*. Later she would write, "It took me some time to discover that beneath the facade of 'supreme power,' generals themselves act more like frightened little boys than the conspiratorial heavies of *Seven Days in May*."[9] What is it that emasculates modern leadership? Blame an inordinate fear of outspokenness or controversy, other generals with more stars, and civilian bosses who, "even on a whim, can pack a hapless general off to Camp Swampy where, like General Halftrack, he will wait month after month for the message the Pentagon will never send."[10]

Instead of simplifying military life and streamlining military mores, the impact of burgeoning aviation and electronic technologies has brought increasing complexity to the employment of airpower. Force application, like the enforcement of discipline, has suffered from "greater reliance on explanation, expertise, and group consensus"[11] as the Air Force moves farther and farther from the dominance of authoritative leadership. Perhaps the trend to less personal, less vivid leadership was inevitable. Yet, the old order gives way grudgingly. We want to stick with comfortable images. Small things such as colorful nicknames brand the halcyon days of that past with a certain bright distinction. Why don't we label modern leaders with affectionate tabs like "Tooey," "Hap," or "Jimmie"? What about "Possum" Hansell and "Rosie" O'Donnell?[12] Is it possible the present generation brooks no affection for authority until it proves worthy of admiration in combat? Was it only the infusion of civilian recruits on a massive scale in World War II that boosted informality in such a pronounced way? Nonetheless, they were good times for airmen.

Perhaps it is symptomatic that we seem to revere our leaders less and accuse them of far more distance from reality than they deserve. It may well be true, as Col Robert D. Heinl Jr. observed, that "the uniformed services today are places of agony for the loyal, silent professionals who doggedly hang on and try to keep the ship afloat."[13] If so, the patient performance of duty that marks the modern hierarchy is most praiseworthy. Still, a Billy Mitchell every now and then would provide just the right flavor to make service life more savory. The large, relatively docile officer corps yearns for a cause célèbre to forge a renewed commitment to airpower, amid all the promise those colorful words portend.

The officer corps is bound by an effectiveness rating system that emphasizes careful husbanding of resources over boldness; it values caution over ardent spirit or daring innovation.

The Air Force desperately needs a new Mitchell—not to do battle with the establishment but to provide a vision for airpower's future. This need surpasses the requirement for another iteration of computer chips and reaches well beyond bean-counting exercises to determine new life expectancies for tired airframes. The sobering reality of knee-jerk reactions to successive revelations of Soviet weaponry has benumbed us all. It is time for a visionary—maybe even a prophet. Someone must articulate a direction for the Air Force from within its most vital constituency—the officer corps. We have rested too long on the pen of Ira C. Eaker. He has been the most widely read airman. He spoke when no one else would speak. His scenario for the future was bleak, pending emergence of a will to contend:

> One day, over the hot line from Moscow, may come this message to our commander in chief in the White House: "Mr. President, we order you not to interfere with our operations against Israel. Obviously, you will comply, for your own chiefs of staff will confirm that we have

"Models of success in the new Air Force tend to be managerial. Caution is in the wind." Where would air refueling be today if General Spaatz had been a "managerial" type?

> overwhelming military superiority!" If present conditions continue much longer, no president of the United States will have any option but to comply with that ultimatum, amounting to surrender.[14]

General Eaker and company won a costly combat victory that provided a place in the sun for airpower. Why has the burden of spokesman been thrust on such a valiant standard-bearer for so long? People who have followed his words in critical editorials over the years may realize now how bold each stroke has been. One should not discount his warnings because he issued them from the safety of retirement; rather, one should remember Mylander's caution about generals:

> Ultimately he will fade into retirement where—under Title 10, Section 888 of the U.S. Code, threat of court-martial and loss of retirement pay—he will be forbidden to use "contemptuous words" in speech or print against the President, Vice-President, Congress, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of a Military Department, Secretary of the Treasury, or the governor or legislature of any state.[15]

Admiring the sagacity and skill of American airpower's foremost spokesman comes easy.

Are all the doors of military opinion sealed by the caution of careerism? The few attempts by officers on active duty to counter corporate-style logic or challenge the incoherencies of civilian control have met dismal fates. One of the most poignant of these was an Air War College commandant's attempt to

examine critically, in a forum that ostensibly protected his remarks with a nonattribution policy, the folly of high-level management of the air war in Vietnam. Sadly for Maj Gen Jerry D. Page, remarks to a closed professional audience proved just as damning as a letter to a left-wing daily.[16] He nearly disappeared, except for the *Pueblo* incident. During that drama, he emerged briefly as a minor but positive actor. His memory sounds a warning Klaxon to incipient free speakers.

A number of surveys were proffered in the last decade to Air Force Academy graduates electing to depart active duty for the allures of the civilian marketplace. Not the least of their registered complaints involved the integrity of Air Force commanders.[17] Some observers have suggested that these young officers were too easily dismayed by a rigid outlook on officership produced by four years of training under the Academy's Honor Code. Such intimations miss the mark widely. In a time of general adherence to situational ethics, it is not surprising that many commanding officers do succumb to disturbing societal norms that the young Academy graduates find abhorrent. Repugnance for unethical behavior is matched, however, by disgust with rampant toadyism.

Having sat through all those Walter Cronkite–narrated airpower films as "doolies," the cadets expected to find a sense of professional certainty in the real Air Force. Mitchellism had been a daily fare. To discover that those few in the officer corps who most nearly epitomized that ideal were often subjected to close scrutiny and low effectiveness ratings must have provoked a terrific reaction in many of the most idealistic neophytes. Their pressing question was not "Why are there so many toadies in the service?" They were far more likely to ask, "Where have all the Mitchells gone?"

Those who serve know how important a single, galvanizing officer of vision and integrity can be in motivating a person's career. Many even know a budding Mitchell, Spaatz, or Eaker. But how confident are we that such an officer will survive, when the slightest divergence can derail a career? The Air Force must preserve a way to the top that permits room for its prophetic nobility to take a stand, suffer a shootdown, and rise like a Phoenix toward a vision like Mitchell's. The alternative? No more Mitchells, no more Eakers, no more certain trumpet for airpower. □

The Air Force desperately needs a new Mitchell—not to do battle with the establishment but to provide a vision for airpower's future.

Notes

1. Lt Col George M. Hall, "When Honor Conflicts with Duty," *Air University Review*, September–October 1980, 46.

2. General Eaker wrote, "The fact is that General Mitchell welcomed the court-martial as it gave additional publicity to his cause, which was, of course, to obtain a separate Air Force." Correspondence with author, 11 March 1981.

3. Stanley L. Falk, "Individualism and Military Leadership," *Air University Review*, July–August 1980, 97.

4. Lt Gen Ira C. Eaker, USAF, "Introduction to Some Observations on Air Power," speech, US Air Force Academy, 19 October 1978.

5. Ibid.

6. William Mitchell, *Winged Defense* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), xv.

7. See Alfred F. Hurley, *Billy Mitchell: Crusader for Air Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975). Hurley quotes Mitchell, who viewed his unprecedented trial as a "necessary cog in the wheel of progress, a requisite step in the modernization and rehabilitation of the national defense of the country" (page 105).

8. Maj Felix F. Moran, "Free Speech, the Military, and the National Interest," *Air University Review*, May–June 1980, 109.

9. Maureen Mylander, "Fear of Generals," *The Nation*, 12 April 1975, 429.

10. Ibid.

11. Morris Janowitz, "Prologue to the Second Edition of *The Professional Soldier*," Working Paper no. 176 (Chicago: University of Chicago, n.d.), 12.

12. See Bruce Callander, "The 'Hap'less Nicknames Up in the Air," *Air Force Times*, 9 March 1981, 20, for a marvelous sketch of endearing wartime personalities.

13. Col Robert D. Heinl Jr., "The Collapse of Armed Forces," *Armed Forces Journal*, 7 June 1971, 30.

14. Eaker, speech.

15. Mylander, 429.

16. Maj Gen Jerry D. Page, correspondence with author, 20 April 1981. Hanson W. Baldwin drafted a full description of the impact of the dramatic incident for the *New York Times*, 27 January 1967, pages 1 and 3; 3 February 1967, page 34; 7 February 1967, page 25; and 17 February 1967, page 15. See also, *U.S. News and World Report*, 6 February 1967, 81.

17. USAF Academy Alumni Association Graduate Survey, Check-Points, Fall and Winter 1980. Col Jock Schwank possesses a detailed compilation of the latest Alumni Association findings. In this regard, I suggest that interested parties contact the association.

I believe it is an established maxim in morals that he who makes an assertion without knowing whether it is true or false is guilty of falsehood, and the accidental truth of the assertion does not justify or excuse him.

—Abraham Lincoln